NOVA SCOTIA Government of Nova Scotia

NS Links Gives Students Career Boosts

Department of Education and Culture (to July 99)
January 27, 1998 11:00

NOTE TO EDITORS: This article first appeared in the January issue of The Corporate Executive, a monthly business publication produced in Halifax.

By NS Links staff

Ask Shondi MacDonald anything about Irish moss, she'll likely have a ready answer, and a detailed one at that.

The 22-year-old university graduate knows the stuff inside and out because she had to. It was her responsibility as a quality control technician at Acadian Seaplants in Charlesville, near Yarmouth.

Ms. MacDonald was hired last spring at the world-class biotechnology facility through Nova Scotia Links, a five-year internship program for the province's post-secondary students.

NS Links is now in its fourth year of operation. The program is administered by the Department of Education and Culture, in partnership with Human Resources Development Canada, Economic Development and Tourism, and businesses throughout Nova Scotia.

Ms. MacDonald, a Yarmouth native, is one of more than 2,000 students the program has placed in short-term internships since it began in 1995. By 1999, NS Links hopes to give a practical career-related boost to at least 1,000 more university and community college students, paving the way for future permanent jobs.

Ms. MacDonald graduated in 1997 from Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., with an honours bachelor of science degree with a double major in environmental biology.

The job at the Charlesville plant, one of six Acadian Seaplants facilities in the Maritimes, was a chance for Ms. MacDonald to put some of her academic knowledge to the test, especially when it came to laboratory experiments.

She was responsible for ensuring the Irish moss, an edible sea plant popular in Asia, was of the highest calibre. At Acadian Seaplants, the Irish moss is grown in inland tanks before being processed and shipped to markets all over the world.

"It was a unique experience because no one else in the world is doing what we're doing," said Ms. MacDonald. "I learned a lot there. It was a good experience in that I was able to realize things I liked to do, and things I didn't like to do and what I might want to do in the future and in choosing a career."

NS Links internships last between 12 and 18 weeks. After Ms. MacDonald wrapped up her internship last summer, Acadian Seaplants extended her stay by a few months.

"She was a keeper," said Stephen Spinney, director of marine plant cultivation. "Nobody has a monopoly on good ideas, and when Shondi came in, she was enthusiastic to apply what she learned in university. We gave her practical work skills and she combined the two and actually helped us put together a good quality-control program."

Mr. Spinney said it's not always easy to find technically trained employees in his part of the province.

"In southwestern Nova Scotia, and specifically in Charlesville, it's a very small base to pull from. In our location, we require considerable technical knowledge and it is often difficult to get technical people to relocate. We like to provide practical and relevant work experience for students and show them that there are good, technical jobs in this region."

Ms. MacDonald said the NS Links professional development sessions, a unique component to the program, were a great way to learn new skills and meet people in the region. Session topics ranged from financial planning to entrepreneurial programs.

"I liked the fact we were able to meet with other students with common career objectives. Most of my friends don't live here any more and they no longer come home for the summer. But this way I got to meet other people."

As for immediate plans, Ms. MacDonald has an offer of work this spring at the company's processing facility. She's not sure if she'll take it, but she's more confident now that with Acadian Seaplants on her resume, she'll be better equipped for the future.

"I have experience in something I can talk about in a job interview. I can say, I did this for them, and I can do the same for you."

This year, under the program, employers can apply for a rebate equal to 40 per cent of a student's wages. Applications may be made at regional offices; deadlines for the May-to-September term is Feb. 28.

Students can pick up employer marketing packages at their campus student or employment services offices.

Employers and students who need more information on the program should call 902-742-0640.

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ngr Jan. 27, 1998 11:00 a.m.

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